FANTASY AND MIMESIS
RESPONSES TO REALITY IN WESTERN LITERATURE
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For
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and
John W. Irvine, Jr.

Acknowledgments

Preface

Western literature is traditionally discussed as representing reality, even though we know mimesis to have limitations. Authors must take a set of complex actions that occupy the three dimensions of space and the fourth of time, and transform them into a linear sequence of words, so the mimetic process is selective. It is subject to stylization and convention. Its reality is special, for the feelings, actions, ideas, people, and places need not *be* real; they only need to seem so. Although western writers through the centuries have presented very different renditions of reality, most of them have ostensibly aimed to produce something "like life".

Textual surface and analysis of the work-in-itself have occupied much of modern scholarship, but when critics do look up from their magnifying glasses to consider broader issues of audience, world, and even author, the idea of imitating reality has usually controlled their critical assumptions, despite its manifest inadequacy. Much literature does present lifelike actions and describe objects in the world we know. People, actions, and settings can be integrated in ways that we recognize as signifying or resembling what we consider reality. But literature has always been more than such a representation. Moreover, numerous works, past and present, deliberately depart from the norms of what can be called consensus reality, the reality we depend on for everyday action. We agree that food, oxygen, and liquid are necessary for life; that bodies fall; that stones are solid and hard; that humans die. This book examines the artistic motives for literary departures even from such basic realities as these, the techniques which such fantasy uses, and readers' reasons for accepting such contradictions of their experience.

For many readers, my references to mimesis will call to mind Auerbach's *Mimesis*. His panoramic survey of the styles and conventions for rendering reality makes plain just how impossible it is ever to achieve colorless

imitation. Many of the authors Auerbach discusses thought of themselves as imitating reality, yet their renderings are based on such different assumptions and selections that one man's realistic imitation is another's stilted stylization. Although Auerbach thus reveals the weakness of any claim to absolute realism, he shares the western cultural bias in favor of imitation, and remains largely silent about deliberate departures from reality. My study owes much to his, but of necessity it operates in a different fashion. If the non-real is your focus, you have no stable point of reference, and the individuality of each departure from reality, each creation of something new, renders chronology largely irrelevant. Hence, I have preferred non-chronological classifications. This lets me discuss Homer's *Odyssey* along with Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* if their fantasies and their assumptions about what is significant reality shed light on each other. I can also compare fantasies and mimetic works as examples of some particular response to reality. Whereas other critics writing on fantasy try to identify it as a genre or mode, I have tried *not* to isolate fantasy from the rest of literature. It is truer to literary practice to admit that fantasy is not a separate or indeed a separable strain, but rather an impulse as significant as the mimetic impulse, and to recognize that both are involved in the creation of most literature.

By fantasy I mean the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal. The works covered range from the trivial escapes of pastoral and adventure stories to the religious visions of Langland and Dante. This does not mean that I am trying to relabel all western masterpieces "fantasy", but fantasy *is an element* in nearly all kinds of literature, especially the narrative, the most important exceptions being realistic novels and some satiric and picaresque works. Fantasy may take the additive form of deliberate distortion and departure; it may also take the subtractive form of omission and erasure. Random or radical selection can produce a fantastic chaos of the sort we see in absurdist drama or Barthelme's *Snow White*. Departure from reality does not preclude comment upon it: indeed, this is one of fantasy's primary functions. Hemingway, in mimetic terms, says "this is what life is like". In the metaphoric manner permitted by their fantasies, so do Kafka and Lewis Carroll.

In Orwell's *1984*, one of the creators of Newspeak gloats that the rapidly narrowing vocabulary of the language will soon make thoughtcrime impossible because there will be no words to express subversive ideas. Trying to talk about fantasy is practically as difficult as wordless thoughtcrime. We do not have the analytic vocabulary to frame our inquiries. Classical philosophers tore a hole in western critical consciousness when they established their negative attitude toward their traditional mythology, which hardened through changes in culture to a general distrust of fantasy. Only in the last century or so, in the work of

psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and students of myth and religion have we even become aware that this blind spot exists. Much remains to be done before its fields of perception can be integrated into our thinking.

This book attempts to help us recover materials lost in this critical void, and it sets about the task by approaching fantasy from several angles. These fall into three groups corresponding to the book's three parts. The first explores the nature of fantasy. Chapter one surveys recent, mostly exclusive, definitions and lays out the inclusive definition I shall use. Chapter two analyzes western literary history in terms of concepts of reality, the changing functions of literature, the functions of fantasy, and the shifts in philosophy and science which accompany these changes. What I say in these chapters focuses, of necessity, on only the most essential ideas and broadest developments. To refine and solidify this material would require many books.

Part II presents the four basic possible literary responses to reality. Chapter three explores escapism, the literature of illusion. Many popular forms of literature offer the reader the chance to relax in hospitable and flattering realms: pastorals, mysteries, and pornography are some of the kinds of escapes explored.

Chapter four analyzes expressive literature, or the literature of vision. Works of this sort present the reader with a new interpretation of reality and offer the pleasures of emotional engagement with such a new world. Such realities, whether positive or negative, are "richer" than the shopworn and lackluster reality of our everyday lives. The realities may invite repulsion (Kafka's *Metamorphosis*) or effervescing delectation (Calvino's *Cosmicomics*); they may show us meaninglessness (Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*), or startle us with their detailed presentation of a realm normally closed to us, the mind of another person (Joyce's *Ulysses*). Expressive literature is a kind of mean between escapist and didactic literature: the author does not force his interpretation on us intellectually or morally, nor does he flatter us into agreement with attractive fairy tales. He engages our emotions and tries to persuade us at least to consider his interpretation of reality, however different from our own it may be.

Chapter five describes didactic literature, the literature of revision. Like expressive literature, this calls attention to a new interpretation of reality, but in addition, the author tries to force the readers to accept the proffered interpretation of reality and to revise their lives and their worlds to fit this interpretation. The author offers at least a token program for reform, and tries to cajole or coerce agreement to this line of action. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a Christian example of the didactic impulse. So, in a more novelistic vein, is Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*. Social and political didacticism inform the spirit of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Although fantasy appears in all these categories based on the intended response to

the author's reality, fantasy is particularly common in the didactic group because it can sugar-coat the pill of restraint and abnegation.

A writer can invite the reader to escape reality; or to acknowledge the possibility of a different reality; or to accept and live by the author's moral explanation of reality. These are the basic possible responses to a reality whose existence you believe in. Chapter six looks at another possible response: in the literature of disillusion, reality is declared unknowable. Authors living with this frightening conviction may try to shake readers into awareness of the possibility by proving to them that their senses are liars and their assumptions unfounded. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* shows perceptions of reality to be chemical, and, as such, alterable. Calvino's *Castle of Crossed Destinies* shows communication by means of symbols to be so ambiguous that we cannot prove anything about external reality by checking with another witness, for we cannot prove that the other person understands our query, or we the answer. In *The House of Assignation*, Robbe-Grillet placidly superimposes possible, mutually contradictory, realities and defies us to make sense of them, although each alone seems plausible. Such authors batter our assurance, undercut our confidence, and mock our lack of sophistication. Like didactic literature, this literature of disillusionment attempts to force the reader's acquiescence but, unlike the didactic, it offers no program of action. We are left to face uncertainty as best we can. Such works can also be called perspectivist, because they insist that our perception of reality is a function of our perspective and vantage point.

Part III of *Fantasy and Mimesis* turns specifically to the literary and psychological influences on the creation of fantasy. Chapter seven explores fantasy as a function of literary form, and tries to analyze the literary impulses that demand from authors such departures from consensus reality. Chapter eight asks questions about the human need for fantasy, and about the psychological compulsions of authors and readers which foster its creation. This final chapter brings together various reasons for reading fantasy and sums up fantasy's role as a means of giving value to life and literary experiences.

Very early in this undertaking, I discovered the immense importance of being Ernst. In one three-month period, it seemed that all the theorists I was reading – Kris, Auerbach, Becker, Gombrich, Neumann, Kahler, Fischer, Cassirer, Curtius, Klinger – were named Ernst or Erich, and even those who slipped by the font as Johann, Karl, or Arthur were luminaries in the Germanic and European tradition: all were trained in classical languages, in philosophy, in western literature and art, some even in science. They always had Husserl and Heidegger up their sleeves, and inevitably trotted Kant out whenever they wanted irrefutable support for any argument they were presenting. I envy their truly formidable and admirable learning, and acknowledge the temerity of my skipping from

Plato to Poulet, and from Carpentier to Kafka and Calvino. My education as a medievalist lets me read the Latin, French, German, Scandinavian, and English texts in the original, but leaves me regrettably ignorant of other languages. Thus, though I have read in Icelandic about one oppressed people's stumblebum hero in Laxness' *The Bell of Iceland* trilogy, I must rely on translation for Hašek's *Good Soldier Schweik*. This should make no great difference, for my concern is the story, not the wording, but I apologize for any instances in which I miss the subtleties of the original, and for the unevenness of my knowledge of recent critical disputes. I know those surrounding *Beowulf* better than those concerning *Madame Bovary*, but since fantasy is rarely discussed in such controversies, this limitation should not matter.

Any treatise taking western literature as its realm is bound to reflect the idiosyncratic reading of its author, and this one is no exception. Although I have tried to keep my major examples diversified as to country and century, certain English and American works receive special attention, if only because I have taught them often. And in the area of minor illustrations and allusions, Anglo-American examples predominate, because that is the tradition I know in greatest detail. Throughout, however, the points I make are analytical and theoretical, not historical or national, so readers may make their own lists of equivalent works from other national traditions; the arguments I put forward should remain valid. Likewise, I stress narrative literature rather than dramatic or lyric, because that is my speciality. Readers specializing in drama can substitute their own examples, and those concerned with poetry may be able to apply my ideas to the symbolic modes of their form.

Since this is a critical overview, not detailed scholarship in a narrow area, I give all quotations in English. I have also reduced notes to only the most essential kinds of documentation and acknowledgment of indebtedness. If the number of notes seems small, it is because few critics have approached literature with its orientation toward reality as their chief concern, and of those few, only a handful have thought in terms of fantasy rather than mimesis. Critically, fantasy is all but uncharted territory. This book and the other recent studies of fantasy are equivalent to reports from the first explorers in new territory. Like those travelers, we pay great attention to the dragons and wonders we think we glimpse, and some of the Northwest Passages we have drawn boldly onto our maps may prove dead ends. One of the great pleasures of such exploration, however, is the chance to see well-known works from a new perspective. What you once thought you knew suddenly proves to be strange, intriguing, and exciting. The *Odyssey*, when analyzed with the nature of its fantasy in mind, reveals vistas not visible to those following traditional approaches. Teachers of any conventional literary speciality will find their perspectives altered after they focus on the roles played by fantasy within their area.

To many thinkers, fantasy has seemed a silly self-indulgence, even a perversion. Plato so viewed it when he was in a prescriptive mood. Although he himself used richly mythic fantasy to communicate complex ideas, his animadversions on mythology in *Phaedrus* are echoed by writer after writer down the centuries. Plato – through "Socrates" – was trying to exclude traditional myths from the phenomena which rational enquiry must explain:

> for my part, Phaedrus, I find that sort of thing pretty enough, yet consider such interpretations rather an artificial and tedious business, and do not envy him who indulges in it. For he will necessarily have to account for centaurs and the chimaera, too, and will find himself overwhelmed by a very multitude of such creatures, gorgons and pegasuses and countless other strange monsters. And whoever discredits all these wonderful beings and tackles them with the intention of reducing them each to some probability, will have to devote a great deal of time to this bootless sort of wisdom. But I have no leisure at all for such pastimes, and the reason, my dear friend, is that as yet I cannot, as the Delphic precept has it, know myself. So it seems absurd to me that, as long as I am in ignorance of myself, I should concern myself about extraneous matters. Therefore I let all such things be as they may, and think not of them, but of myself – whether I be, indeed, a creature more complex and monstrous than Typhon, or whether perchance I be a gentler and simpler animal, whose nature contains a divine and noble essence. (*Phaedrus*, 229D ff., Cassirer's translation in *Language and Myth*)

Socrates' refusal to rationalize chimeras was eminently sensible, especially given the crude methods available prior to Romantic myth-study and psychoanalysis. However, critics following his lead generalized these specific and limited objections into moral imperatives, and thunderingly decried any literary use of chimeras, pegasuses, and gorgons. Even granting that Socrates' objections were misused and misunderstood, and hence that he should not be held responsible for subsequent developments, we would now argue that he creates a false emphasis when dividing the monstrous from the divine within himself and preferring to concentrate on his diviner part. Since Freud, we feel that one can know oneself only if one recognizes the monsters inhabiting the fastnesses of the unconscious. Some of those inner monsters, like the Gorgons, are destructive and hideous. Others, like Pegasus, beggar description, and leave in their wake dissatisfied dreams of loveliness unpossessed. These denizens of the mental landscape cast long shadows on literature, so this book, by exploring these shadows, is not so far from obeying the oracle as the words of Socrates suggest.

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Part I

Literature and the
representation of reality:
a new approach
to fantasy and mimesis

Introduction

Like M. Jourdain, who discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life, readers of this book may find they have been reading fantasy, teaching it, and writing about it without ever having brought their critical consciousness to bear on the fantastic elements. To many academics, after all, "fantasy" is a subliterature in lurid covers sold in drugstores; or it is a morbid manifestation of the romantic spirit found in the works of Hoffmann, Poe, and less reputable gothic writers. Or fantasy means Tolkien and his ilk – nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors whose *œuvres* are not part of traditional literature courses. But fantasy encompasses far more than these phenomena. It informs the spirit of all but a small part of western literature. We are curiously blind to its presence because our traditional approaches to literature are based on mimetic assumptions. Philosophy and Christianity have denigrated the non-real on various grounds, with the result that we have never developed an analytic vocabulary for exploring and understanding fantasy. Even now, we can form ideas about it only with difficulty, and must struggle to wrest our insights from the inchoate imprecision of wordlessness.

Part I of *Fantasy and Mimesis* will briefly examine what has been done to remedy our lack of critical understanding. Chapter one analyzes definitions of fantasy that have emerged in the last two decades and shows how they relate to one another. Chapter two sketches the history of fantasy as a literary phenomenon. When has it been most common? Why did it fall into disrepute? Why is it reappearing so frequently in contemporary writing? Only when we have become sensitized to the prevalence of fantasy can we go on in Part II to study literary responses to reality, both fantastic and mimetic. These responses are complexly varied. Imitation and imaginative transformation, metaphor and allegory, whimsy and myth interact in such elaborate patterns that creating divisions for